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Physician Scientist Research Pathway Leading to Certification by the American Board of Pathology

Sharon W. Weiss, MD¹ and Rebecca L. Johnson²

Abstract
In 2014, the American Board of Pathology, in response to the pathology community, approved a physician scientist research pathway. This brief report summarizes the history of and objectives for creating the physician scientist research pathway and the requirements of the American Board of Pathology for the certification of physician scientist research pathway trainees.

Keywords
American Board of Pathology, board certification, physician scientists, research pathway, residents

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In the fall of 2013, the American Board of Pathology (ABP) received a proposal sponsored by several organizations (note 1) requesting that ABP offers a research pathway leading to board certification. The culmination of much discussion, this proposal reflected a growing concern that pathology, long steeped in a rich tradition of research, has become less attractive as a discipline, particularly to physician scientists. The implementation of a physician scientist research pathway (PSRP), it was argued, could ameliorate this situation and offer added benefits to pathology departments. Arguments in support of such a pathway can be summarized as follows:

- The number of physician scientists applying to pathology programs has decreased over the past several years, whereas it has increased for programs in internal medicine, pediatrics, radiation oncology, and dermatology. Data compiled from the Association of American Medical Colleges Graduation Questionnaire indicate that between 2000 and 2006, only 7.9% of MD/PhD graduates from medical science training programs (MSTP) selected a residency in pathology compared to 20.9% and 10.3% in internal medicine and pediatrics, respectively.¹ If one accepts the premise that physician scientists are more likely to choose a discipline in which a formal research track is offered, the existence of such a track arguably would induce more medical students to enter pathology programs. Ultimately, it was hoped this would improve the growing shortage of physician scientists.
- A PSRP, offering a blend of research and clinical training, would improve the success of trainees who remain in academic pathology. The American Board of Internal Medicine, which has long sponsored such a program, reports that 72% of graduates from their physician scientists training pathway held academic positions, over pathology drew nearly equally from their pool of MSTP graduates (30.5% vs 27.8%, respectively).²

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have extramural funding, and over 60% had National Institutes of Health funding.3

- Although not founded on data, there was some optimism that a formal PSRP would serve as an inducement for increased institutional support, facilitate the recruitment of research faculty to a department, and increase the amount of extramural funding.

While acknowledging the importance of research, the first priority of the ABP, as embodied in its new mission statement, is to “promote the field of pathology and the continuing competence of practicing pathologists.” Any modifications in certification standards must necessarily be congruent with this mission and not erode these standards. At the same time, the ABP recognizes that pathology is uniquely poised to contribute new knowledge and innovative technologies to the field of medicine and that we should aspire to do so. The ABP is also mindful that exposure to research should be a serious, meaningful, and longitudinal experience and not a series of fragmented rotations.

Because of its importance, the ABP devoted its entire 2014 summer retreat to this topic. With the added participation of Drs Daniel Remick and David Louis from the Association of Pathology Chairs and Dr George Lister from American Board of Pediatrics, the topic was discussed and debated over a 2-day period. At the conclusion of the meeting, the proposal for a PSRP was approved in principle and formally adopted in January 2015. The ABP believes this proposal retains the rigor of clinical training while offering additional research training to a talented cadre of physician scientists. Its structure is also
designed to give departments latitude in deciding who should enter the pathway and how the research year(s) should be constructed and monitored. However, the ABP intends to ask programs for information regarding candidates completing the program so that it can track and assess outcomes. Finally, the ABP acknowledges with gratitude the organizations and individuals that initiated the dialogue of this pressing issue and assisted the board of trustees in their deliberations.

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